



IOWA CHAPTER

Keeping Iowa's Beaches Free of Bacteria

Iowa enjoys numerous state parks with beaches. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources collects water samples from those beaches and tests them for bacteria.¹ If the samples reach high thresholds of bacteria levels, the beaches are declared closed or swimmers are given a warning that swimming is not recommended.

High levels of bacteria and other pathogens can cause illnesses when people come into contact with the water. High levels of bacteria indicate that fecal material has entered the waterbody. The source of the fecal material includes failing septic tanks, pets, wildlife, manure from livestock and untreated effluent from wastewater treatment plants. Fecal material can enter a lake through stormwater runoff from both urban and rural areas. It can also enter directly from breakages of pipes that carry sewage, from failures at wastewater treatment plants and from equipment failure at concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs).



Photo credit: Gene Alexander, USDA NRCS

The following tips will help keep bacteria and other pathogens out of Iowa's lakes:

- A septic tank should be pumped out every 3 to 5 years. At the time it is pumped, the septic system will also be inspected. Repair any problems that are found. Don't wait for the septic system to fail to have it inspected and repaired.
- Manure applicators need to follow the recommended application rates and not over-apply manure on the spread fields. CAFO operators need to keep their equipment in working order to prevent accidental discharges into water bodies.
- Municipalities should keep wastewater treatment facilities maintained so that they are not discharging untreated or partially treated sewage into surface waters. Wastewater treatment systems that are overtaxed, aged or decaying need to be upgraded. Repeated sewer bypasses, where untreated sewage is dumped into a stream following rainstorms, are a symptom of inadequate capacity.
- Pick up pet feces and put it in the trash. When your pet's poop is left where it was deposited, the next rain storm can wash it down the storm sewer or into a ditch. From there, it is a straight pipeline to the nearest stream.

¹ Private beaches or beaches managed through local government entities are responsible for collecting their own samples and managing closures.